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Witness-in-communion: a theology of existence to essence during the pandemic

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Abstract
The past months of pandemic have laid down a number of challenges to both the practices of the Christian faith and the theology that underpins many of these practices. This article seeks to discern a method of doing theology that can be responsive to these changed circumstances and which might help cast new light on entrenched positions in the Church. Such a theology takes experienced phenomena seriously, recognizing the key role a lived reality plays in a sacramental faith. It situates the importance of this experience in the biblical mandate to the Christian to be a *witness*, albeit one grounded in and inhabiting the community of the faithful. This grounding tests experience in the fire of Scripture and living tradition to continually refine the essential nature of what can be said to *be*. In doing so, we enter ever more into the mystery of a God made incarnate and of God's created order.

Keywords
communion, Eucharist, existentialism, experience, incarnation, pandemic, participation, phenomenology, tradition, virtual, witness

The global pandemic has been an interesting time to undertake theology. Much change in ecclesial practice has been undertaken first and discussed later – all the while trying to walk the fine line between tradition and imagination. For Churches that place the Eucharist at the centre of their faith, this has been particularly

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acute – a church whose community is focused on a gathering of the faithful in one place to share bread and wine must rapidly adapt when faced with a situation that denies those very central elements. A pandemic is not a situation where the Church is oppressed by secular powers; instead, it is a situation where creation itself, in which the Church lives, acts and worships, changes the rules of engagement. It may feel like an aberration, and there are arguments that this pandemic was the result, at least in part, of poor environmental standards and a failure to steward God's world, yet the fact remains: it has, at times, become a danger to health to do what the very centre of a eucharistic faith demands – for the community of the baptized to gather around the altar in thanksgiving.

Of course, any theology done 'hot' in the midst of a pandemic must in essence be contingent, yet this is not a defective theology.[1] In this article, I suggest that the Church might not only learn more about itself from the pandemic, but that this way of doing theology – through narrative, experience and ultimately through witness – is one that the Church might usefully adopt.

While this way of examining what is occurring in our faith in this time of crisis may not quite support Sartre's suggestion '*l'existence précède l'essence*',[2] it is nonetheless a theology that takes observation seriously and is open to understanding more about the essence of our faith *praxis* through examining its concrete existence as experienced by the worshipper. We have received much about the Eucharist and its norms, yet the fundamental question that asks what the Eucharist is as essence – what is required for it to *be* Eucharist – has been dramatically challenged. The challenge extends far beyond the meaning of a shared meal; the Church is *eucharistic* in nature, in that the shared communion of bread and wine and the shared communion of the Church speak to and of each other's essence. If, for reasons of practicality, we are unable to meet together, yet still understand the Church to be *eucharistic*, then it is surely valid to ask what such eucharistic community in such a time as this might tell us about the sharing in the gifts on the altar. What, then, might these experienced elements of eucharist be, and what might they reflect back of the essence of the Christian communion?

Sacraments are by their nature experiential – offering an outward sign of an invisible grace (albeit one whose nature has been widely contested and debated).[3] To access that grace, or rather to participate in and receive from that sacrament, nonetheless necessitates a level of experience. Opposition to virtual consecration – that is, the consecration of elements through a computer screen – has reflected a deeply held belief that to remove one of the senses – most particularly that of touch – from the act of Holy Communion by its nature invalidates the act. This suggests that something is missing from the essence of the Eucharist, and that we can identify this through a loss of its expression, or more rightly in a loss of the reception of the sacrament. It could be argued, however, that such a view fails any attempt to be objective: for example, some Christians may be unable to touch, smell or see, suggesting that, if the senses must all be involved in order to recognize a sacrament, then these people are *by nature* excluded from sacramental unity in

the body of Christ. The experience of such people must surely be heard and must also help us refine our knowledge of the essence of the Eucharist itself.

From this, then, it is clear that a focus on the existence – that is, a focus by the Christian on what might be described as the essential elements of the Eucharist – can go some way towards telling us what is essential to the Eucharist and what is not. Beyond this, it can also help us understand what can be rightly called eucharistic outside the act of Holy Communion, referring more widely to those elements that constitute Christian community. For the Christian, however, it is not simply the existence of the eucharistic gifts (and the conditions required for such an existence to be eucharistic) that is necessary to understand the essence of the Eucharist, but also a recognition that a common language of meaning underlies the eucharistic act or being.[4] As an example, the receiving community believes that the bread broken and blessed is not simply bread, but rather that a complex dance is interwoven between substance, matter and form that gives a meaning to that particular host, at that particular time.

This meaning may be defined in a number of different ways, leading to doctrines of transubstantiation through to memorialism. Nonetheless, it is arguable that attempting to define the mysterious act itself attempts to answer the underlying question, if such a question exists, by the wrong method entirely. What Christians might better do is to see and describe what is the essence-through-existence that the sacrament exhibits – requiring less a focus on abstract metaphysical arguments than a deliberate attempt to simply observe what is taking place – a focus on the things themselves (where things might be the elements, the liturgy, the interior disposition, the relationship to others). That a pre-consecrated host is different from a consecrated one is something that is experienced through the acts of liturgy, intentionality and reception – for Christians, the reality must be that the existence of the host is fundamentally different in how it *is* to them upon consecration. Given the lack of experienceable physical change to the host, and a denial of the magical in the form of incantation during the eucharistic prayer, there must nonetheless be something that Christians can say about the phenomenon of the post-consecration host that differentiates it.

Denial of virtual consecration cannot simply rest on abstract theory, but in an incarnated religion this theory must relate to that which occurs. It is such an enhanced phenomenology – one in which an appreciation of and a stating of the indelible character of sign that is part of the form of existence are required to describe that existence – that offers fertile ground for theological reflection in a context like that of the pandemic, leading from an existential description of the Eucharist to an understanding of the essence of lived Christian communion in community. Indeed, the essential nature of community in the Christian life forms a fundamental element in the employment of such a phenomenological description to this end, as further described below.

Such an approach might aid in a wider interrogation of an act of eucharistic worship. It is striking that questions about eucharistic worship in the context of stay-at-home orders have focused so much on the validity of acts made virtual,

such as consecration. More pertinent, however, are questions about what the online provision (for want of a better word) of Eucharist to those at home is expected to achieve. Services have been pre-recorded, altering the temporal fabric of the Church's activities; likewise, services have been patched together, with segments recorded in individuals' homes and inserted into a wider service of Eucharist.

Very serious questions should be asked about such patchwork Eucharists – primarily, whether they are eucharistic in form at all. In other words, is it possible to separate out elements of such a service so that the act of consecration is temporally and spatially removed from the other essential elements of the act of worship – a Eucharist in which the consecration as a standalone act takes place in a church building? Is such an act eucharistic? Indeed, can the consecration be separated and rightly be called a consecration? Such a deconstruction of the Eucharist can, albeit unconsciously, tell us about the underlying theology of the sponsoring institution. There are good theological reasons for including members of the congregation in such a manner, yet it is questionable whether doing so in a way that disrupts the fabric of the Eucharist is justifiable – certainly when no debate has been had. Likewise, a pre-recorded Eucharist whose nature is poorly defined carries risk – those observing are watching a historical event, not a current offering of prayer, and this cannot be rightly called active participation.

The theology underlying such a deconstructed Eucharist suggests that the act of consecration, and the Eucharist itself, is performative rather than participative, despite the clear intention to be more inclusive and representative of the congregation. The experience of the Eucharist in normal times is fundamentally participative, and while offering a Eucharist for those at home to observe is not an unreasonable aim, it should be made explicit what is being undertaken. It is arguable that any Eucharist that is simply observed cannot truly be participated in. Observation may lead to genuine spiritual communion but it cannot rightly be said that those observing are participating fully in the manner that would be expected in eucharistic worship – rather, they are experiencing Eucharist-by-observation. Such an act of worship appears to lack a fundamental element – genuine participation – of what might rightly be called Eucharist.

Yet participation in the context of the Eucharist may itself need better definition. As noted, throughout the pandemic priests have been offering private Eucharists which have been observed by congregations. Previously, such Eucharists would also have been described as lacking a fundamental element of Eucharist: that is, the participation of the faithful. Indeed, some clergy have refused to celebrate the Eucharist for this reason. However, necessity has meant that many clergy have celebrated the Eucharist without congregations present without much thought given to the theology. These Eucharists must, however, be by nature eucharistic if they are to be recognized as such – which has been the case. An argument can be made that those participating in these Eucharists include the communion of saints and, indeed, the congregation through participation in the priesthood of all believers, embodied in and vicariously offered by the

priest *on behalf of* the congregation. This, then, raises the question as to whether participation requires an observation of the Eucharist at all. Indeed, it is possible that participation is guaranteed by virtue of the baptized giving their consent to the priest to celebrate on their behalf.

This calls into question the need for live-streaming of the Eucharist; while it may prove a comfort to congregations, it does not appear *in and of itself* to affect their participation in the Eucharist. It is quite possible that, given this fact, a service of morning or evening prayer, with participation embodied in the speaking of the corporate words alone but together, holds a more eucharistic character for the community than a streamed service of the Eucharist. A service of the word and a eucharistic service are of different characters – they appear to offer participation in different but complementary ways. In a time when virtual – and thus remote and often alone – celebration becomes the norm, an act of worship that is already a sign of the corporate prayer of the Church alone but together, in which the individual worshipper truly participates by praying alongside others in the Church militant, offers much fertile ground. This is the very character of the daily office – yet it is clear that such a character has not been understood or learned by many within the Church.

The phenomenon of Zoom Eucharists, which enables a level of virtual participation, appears to offer a different model of worship. Here, there appears to be a level of participation, albeit one that does not offer the *gatheredness* that would normally form part of the Eucharist. At first glance, it appears to offer a defective form of Eucharist. However, the experience of communities for whom this provides the only form of Eucharist (for example the disabled or housebound) might make us hesitate before suggesting that this is definitively the case. Indeed, historically the Book of Common Prayer offers an understanding of spiritual communion for those who cannot receive by cause of sickness, which is explicitly not described as defective, despite a lack of consummation of the elements (raising questions about the necessity of consummation in this particular existence, and thus the possible essence, of the Eucharist).[5] The experience of those on the margins is not peripheral but central to the Christian narrative, and thus to reject such a model is premature. Such a tension highlights the importance of this phenomenological approach, and the possibilities it offers for interrogating different manifest existences (that is, the existence of the Eucharist as seen through different eyes) to understand the fundamental essence. Christianity is incarnational – any attempt to understand the created order's grace must take this experience seriously.

There is a false dichotomy made between the virtual and the 'real'. The virtual is mediated entirely through and within the created order – the fact that we cannot see radio waves or electricity does not make them any less real. Participation in the virtual appears to be of a fundamentally different order to participation in the physical, as the virtual merely offers a representation – a computer-generated image and sound of the person to whom we are speaking. However, on further examination, any interaction with the external world (or indeed the created order) is by nature simply representational. Each of our senses is merely a method of representation to an internal processor. This does not make our senses or our

engagement with the world any less real, but it does pose the question as to whether the modern technologies we now employ are merely extensions of a representational system with which we engage in our incarnate state. The *real* becomes more and more challenging to define – once again, exchanging an attempt to define what is *real* for a description of what *is* (that is, what exists to us phenomenologically) may offer a more fruitful reflection on our incarnated state. Here, then, is a contingent theology, yet one that is unrelenting in its search for the essence of that which God gives.

Such a theology, in which description of phenomena helps define the essence of those phenomena, might be described as a theology of witness. Christian theology cannot be divorced from its roots in Scripture and tradition, and this method of doing theology does not seek to change the fundamentals of the faith, but rather to better describe and uncover them by being constantly alert and paying attention to how and where signs of grace are present in our own narrative. The term 'witness', then, appears appropriate – a theology that is observational, that describes what is experienced from a particular perspective, and that offers a witness to things as they are received. This way of doing theology is in the tradition of the biblical narrative – itself a form of witness to God's deeds and ultimately to the Word made flesh. Christ takes on flesh and inhabits a narrative and an experience. A theology of witness is a theology that is in a process of constant refinement, and one that recognizes and rejoices in the way of the Spirit through creation. It is a tentative theology that utilizes imagination to purify doctrine – that looks to describe the signs of the times in a way that dialogues with the Christian inheritance, ever renewing and yet ultimately paring back the tradition in a way that makes it properly called living. In the context of the Eucharist, we can see questions being raised about physical presence and consummation – questions that are not new, and that themselves offer glimpses into the essence itself.

Yet such a method of theology runs the risk of individualism; it runs the risk of placing too great an emphasis on individual observation at the expense of testing this observation in the mind of the Christian community. Such testing must involve reflection on the inherited tradition, on Scripture, and on the experience of others. Here again it becomes clear that any such theology remains contingent – as, surely, must any serious Christian theology. It is clear that any simplistic notion of 'what the Bible says' is not the same as Christianity; likewise, it is simplistic to suggest that mere experience alone can define the sacramental. However, what a reflection on existence – an alertness to grace – can do is help the Christian-in-community to undertake a dialogue between their experience and the best understandings of essence as found in the Christian tradition. Such understandings will always be contingent, and thus a dialogue will inevitably affect both the experience and the previous understanding, the individual and the corporate.

This theology, then, might best be called witness-in-communion – a theology that rejoices in and encourages description of existence and that recognizes the importance of such a witness, albeit one that is grounded in the wider communion of Christ's body. This witness can then be tested in communion – not rejecting

Scripture and tradition, but dialoguing with it, and with the Church more widely. Indeed, any dialogue with Scripture and tradition is, in fact, dialogue with the Church triumphant; thus the communion as described in witness-in-communion is simply the Church militant and the Church triumphant – Christ's body.

It offers a way of doing theology during the pandemic, yet also a way of integrating theology with other disciplines. To describe the experience or existence of a phenomenon is best done by making use of wider human knowledge than merely theological abstraction. To utilize this knowledge in witness in this context is also to subject this knowledge to the test of witness-in-communion, thereby interrogating such knowledge in the light of the inheritance. Doing so avoids a hermeneutic of suspicion, all too often employed when science, among other disciplines, is seen to encroach on theological ground. Seeing other disciplines as a legitimate part of the enterprise of witness will surely offer a richer, more developed and more honest theology – one that treats human knowledge as valuable, and in which the Christian's own biases and influences are both recognized and named.

Such a theology is fundamentally in agreement with the biblical witness itself. 'You are witnesses of these things,' says Christ after the resurrection (Luke 24.48) – and likewise 'you will know them by their fruits' (Matthew 7.16). Christians sent out in mission are doing so as witnesses-in-communion. The concept is also found in the Old Testament's portrayal of Israel as witness (Isaiah 43.10–12, 44.6–8). It professes faith in the Spirit's work in the world while taking inherited tradition, Scripture and lived narrative as fundamental to an understanding of what can be said to *be* in existence. It offers us an opportunity to interrogate our practices in the face of a global pandemic.

This article does not seek to offer a definitive view on contested questions that have been raised during the pandemic period. In many ways, we can look at elements of the virtual world and feel uncertain about whether we can say that anything or nothing is happening. Nonetheless, we can be encouraged to witness to graces received. God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year, as the famous hymn goes. The Church can choose to witness to this, or choose to cocoon. If we choose the former, we must be ready to be surprised by what we might find.

> You are my witnesses, says the Lord,
> and my servant whom I have chosen,
> so that you may know and believe me
> and understand that I am he.
> Before me no god was formed,
> nor shall there be any after me. (Isaiah 43.10)

Notes

1. Lluis Oviedo, 'Theology in times of pandemic', *Studia Humana*, Vol. 10, no. 1 (2021), pp. 1–7.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996 [1946]), pp. 29–30.

3. Philip Cary, *Outward Signs: the powerlessness of external things in Augustine's thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 158–64.
4. John Laurance, *The Sacrament of Eucharist* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), p. 28.
5. 'The communion of the sick' in *The Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 325.

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